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ABSTRACT

The relationship between activity and positive self-esteem in girls 12 to 17 years of age was explored by this study. The primary goal was to determine if the positive relationship between physical activity and positive self-esteem which exists for women also exists for girls. It was also hoped that insight would be gained regarding the factors that are associated with both diminished self-esteem and the reasons girls choose to drop out of sports. Data was collected for this study in a focus group format. The girls in each focus group (n=67) were asked to fill out a questionnaire exploring: (1) confidence and perceived competence; (2) levels of activity, sports each girl participated in, reasons for being active and perceived obstacles to physical activity; and (3) career choices and the perceived viability of a chosen career. After completing the questionnaire, the girls were engaged in a discussion focusing on their views on sports, gym, confidence and risk-taking, and their concerns about becoming adults. The decline in athletic participation among adolescent girls and the link between physical activity and positive mental health suggests that girls should be encouraged to remain physically active throughout adolescence and into adulthood. Seven tables present results. (TS)

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Physical Activity and Self-Esteem in Girls: The Teen Years

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Introduction

This article reports on the second phase of a study on the relationship between physical activity and self-esteem in girls that Melpomene has undertaken over the past two years.

Our goal is to answer the question "Does the positive relationship between physical activity and positive self-esteem that exists for women exist for girls as well?" Additionally, through our conversations with the girls in this study, we hope to gain insight into some of the factors that are associated with diminished self-esteem in girls and the reasons they choose to drop out of sports.

The second phase of this study involves girls between the ages of 12 and 17. In our research on younger girls aged nine to 12, we found a strong relationship between physical activity and self-esteem, as reported in the Fall 1992 issue of the Melpomene *Journal* (6).

The girls in Phase One of the study described physical activity and sports as a way to feel good about themselves, despite numerous obstacles to their participation in sports.

Although the study of younger girls answered many questions, it left us with many more still to be answered, especially with regard to how our findings might relate to older girls. For example, are teenaged girls as active as pre-teen girls? Are the older girls motivated in the same way? Do older girls derive self-esteem from sports participation? How do the obstacles that younger girls face affect girls as they get older? Do the girls simply drop out of sports, or do they find ways to overcome those obstacles?

In the second phase, focusing on older girls, we again gathered firsthand data and then listened to what girls themselves said about physical activity, sports and how they feel about themselves.

Melpomene became interested in the topic for several reasons. First, research on adolescent girls finds that over the teen years, girls' participation in sports drops dramatically (4, 13). Second, research that has focused on development of both girls and boys in this age group has found that as girls move through the adolescent years, their self-esteem drops dramatically, a drop far more marked than that for boys (10).

We questioned the relationship between the dropping levels of sports participation and the decline in self-esteem. Having studied the reasons for and the benefits of physical activity for women of all ages, we are well aware of the relationship between physical activity and positive self-esteem. In each of our membership studies over the past 10 years, women have told us that physical activity enhances self-esteem, reduces stress, promotes a positive body image and makes them feel good about themselves in general (6).

Review of the Literature

Literature focusing on adolescent girls, physical activity and self-esteem is minimal. However, as more attention focuses on girls' and women's health, research in this area is increasing.

Several general statements can be made concerning previous research findings on the relationship between physical activity and self-esteem for adolescent girls. Research has documented that sports participation in girls throughout the adolescent years positively affects their self-esteem, body image and physical strength (1, 6, 11). Parents and peers are important influencing factors in the continuation of sports participation among adolescent girls. The following review describes the research that documents factors affecting sports participation and positive benefits of participation among adolescent and teenaged girls

The *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, a publication of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (13), reports on a study that was a component of the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System. This 1990 study surveyed a representative sample of 11,631 students in grades nine through 12 nationally.

The survey asked about health-risk behaviors and physical activity patterns. The study documented that vigorous activity was significantly less common among female students than among male students and that participation levels drop steadily during the high school years.

Eldon Snyder and Elmer Spreitzer of Bowling Green State University conducted a study of approximately 500 female athletes to determine the correlates of sports participation among adolescent girls (11). Participants were drawn randomly from varsity rosters on file at the Ohio High School Athletic Association. The study was limited to high school juniors and seniors, and the overall response rate was 46%. A control group was also selected.

Findings indicated that the parents of the athletes seemed more interested in sports than the parents of non-athletic girls. The athletes started participation at a young age and received substantial encouragement from peers, teachers and coaches. The athletes in this study had more positive attitudes about their body images than their non-athletic counterparts.

A 1975 study conducted at the University of Alabama at Birmingham by Blackman, et al. (1) involved eight high school dance team members and a control group of eight participants from physical education classes. The purpose of the study was to determine to what extent

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female physical fitness and self-concept were affected by dance team participation in high school.

The following tests of physical strength were administered in June and October to both groups of girls: cardiovascular fitness, flexibility, muscle strength and body composition. Several psychological tests were administered as well, including Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory Form A, Tennessee Self-Concept Scale and Body Cathexis Scale.

Results showed that dance team participants increased aerobic activity, decreased body fat and became physically stronger over the course of the study. According to the results of the Tennessee Self-Concept Scale, physical and social self improved significantly for dance team participants.

A Canadian study conducted by Barbara Brown, et al. (2) was designed to examine the influence of significant others on continued involvement in sports by adolescent girls. Data was collected from 376 high school girls who answered a forced-choice, self-administered questionnaire. Five-point Likert-type scales were constructed to assess the socializing influence of significant others on adherence to physical activity. Three levels of sport were examined: intramural and intersport at the school level and community sport, which offered the most competitive sports.

Findings from this study indicate that parents and peers exert some influence on continued involvement in sports by adolescent girls. Evidence from the study showed small but significant positive correlations between participation and parental influence for all three contexts of participation.

Fathers appeared to play the primary role of socializing agents while mothers were more active role models. Parents and peers played important roles in the continued participation of girl athletes, although the level of importance for parents and peers varies in context.

Canadian researcher Janice Butcher, in her report, "Issues Concerning Girls' Sports Participation During Childhood and Adolescence" (3), discussed some important issues concerning girls and sports participation. According to the report, girls have limited opportunities for both competitive and recreational sports activities outside of the public school system, especially when compared to boys. Recreation and community-based programs offer more opportunities to boys than to girls. Research on socializing agents and situations clearly showed that both are important in influencing young girls to become active in sports. Therefore, girls need both a positive socializing influence from significant others and opportunities to compete in sports activities.

Butcher reports that adolescent girls need to be encouraged to develop their physical skills. By improving those skills, girls will also improve their competence, which will give them the confidence needed to continue to try new, interesting sports. Young girls also need positive role models, which are hard to find in the media. Butcher also cites a lack of positive role models, which makes it hard for girls to take achievement and excellence in sports seriously. Finally, Butcher concludes that traditional sex role stereotypes of female athletes must be eliminated and girls must be encouraged to participate in sports suited to their interest and potential.

The Athletic Footwear Association (AFA) described the many benefits of physical activity in its 1991 report "Fit to Achieve" (4). The Youth Sports Institute of Michigan conducted the study, sponsored by the AFA, in which 10,000 10- to 18-year-olds responded to a questionnaire.

Among the potential benefits of physical activity listed by both boys and girls were improved self-confidence and self-esteem, enhanced assertiveness, emotional stability, independence and self-control. The study asserts that physical activity provides an outlet for stress and instills self-worth in children.

The Athletic Footwear Association study reported that sports participation declines dramatically among 13- to 18-year-olds. The report stated that 10-year-olds are much more involved in sports than high school seniors. The problem of adolescents dropping out of sports was analyzed with specific regard to gender in this report. The primary reason for participating in sports cited by both boys and girls is to have fun. The reasons girls gave for discontinuing involvement in sports were: (1) they lost interest, (2) they were not having fun anymore, (3) there was too much pressure and (4) they needed more study time.

The study concluded that because sports are usually geared toward the elite athlete, recreational athletes tended to drop out when it would be most beneficial for them to remain active.

During the past 10 years, researchers at Melpomene have documented the benefits of physical activity for adults in the form of increased confidence, decreased stress levels and increased self-esteem (7, 12). More recently, Melpomene researchers have documented the positive relationship between self-esteem and physical activity in nine- to 12-year-old girls (6). Some of the studies mentioned above, however, report that girls drop out of sports as they enter their teen years (4, 13).

Method

Data was collected for this study in a focus group format. A research team composed of a grade school educator, experts in questionnaire and focus group design, Melpomene research staff and Melpomene interns were instrumental in designing the focus group and questionnaire format used in Phase One of this study. With minor modifications, the same questionnaire and focus group format were used in Phase Two.

The girls in each focus group were asked to fill out a three-page questionnaire that consisted of three parts. The first section contained 21 questions about confidence and perceived competence, with a five-point response scale that ranged from "always true" to "always false." This section included questions such as "I feel proud of the work I do," "I'm good at sports," "I like the way I look" and "I am pretty good at a lot of things."

The sum of these scores became the Melpomene Confidence/Competence Scale. This scale represents a broad measure of self-esteem as well as of feelings of confidence and competence in one's ability in areas such as sports, math, science and school in general. This section of the questionnaire used many of the items and the format style from the American Association of University Women (AAUW) (10).

With permission of the AAUW, we duplicated the AAUW Self-Esteem Index in our study. The AAUW Self-Esteem Index was used as a measure of feelings of self-confidence alone. Table 1 describes the basis for calculating this index.

The second section of the questionnaire focused on physical activity. It addressed levels of activity, sports each girls participated in, reasons for being active and perceived obstacles to physical activity. The final section of the questionnaire included questions on career choices and the perceived viability of a chosen career.

After completing the questionnaire, the girls were engaged in an hour to hour-and-a-half discussion led by research team facilitators. A recorder from the research team was assigned to take notes on the group discussion. All focus groups agreed to having their discussions audiotaped.

AAUW Self-Esteem Index

The AAUW Self-Esteem Index was figured by using the following items:

1. *I like most things about myself.*
2. *I like the way I look.*
3. *I wish I were somebody else.*
4. *I'm happy the way I am.*
5. *Sometimes I don't like myself that much.*

A value of +2 was assigned to "always true" responses, +1 to "sort of true," 0 to "sometimes true/sometimes false," -1 to "sort of false" and -2 to "always false." For negative questions, these values were reversed.

To arrive at the index value, the value for each of the five questions was summed. For analysis purposes, a constant was added to eliminate negative numbers.

Greenberg Lake Associates for AAUW chose the five questions above by running a factor analysis on the entire battery of questions in its study, *Shortchanging Girls, Shortchanging America*. It used the five questions that exhibited the most variance, with the exception of the question "I like the way I look," which showed a wide variance for girls but not for boys.

For further information, contact the American Association of University Women, 1111 16th Street NW, Washington, D.C. 20036. Phone: (202) 785-7700.

Table 1

The girls discussed their views on sports, gym, confidence and risk-taking and their concerns about becoming adults.

Tapes and notes from the focus groups were transcribed and coded on the basis of recurring themes, such as sports, relationship to boys in sports, confidence and risk-taking and thoughts and concerns about growing up and personal worries. The quotations that appear in this report were taken directly from the transcribed tapes of focus group discussions.

The girls' responses to open-ended items on the questionnaires were coded, and the overall Melpomene Confidence/Competence Score and the AAUW Self-Esteem Index were calculated by project staff. Statistical analysis was conducted by a researcher on the Melpomene staff.

Simple frequency distributions for each variable were examined. Project staff members created new variables suggested by the data. Because of the importance of obtaining an average physical activity level, a scale was constructed that combined the following items: the number of activities each participant said they engaged in, the number of times per week each participant engaged in these activities and the number of hours per week each participant engaged in these activities. The average, called the "level," was determined by totalling these three variables and dividing by three.

Description of the Sample

Ten focus groups were conducted. Arrangements for the focus groups were made in collaboration with three public schools and a variety of organizations, including the Girl Scouts, YWCA, community centers and the Minneapolis Park Board.

Each group consisted of three to 12 girls, for a total of 67 girls ranging in age from 12 to 17 years old, in grades seven through 12. The girls were from the Minneapolis-St. Paul metropolitan area, with the exception of one group, which was conducted in rural Minnesota.

The average height of the participants was 5' 3," and the average weight was 117 pounds. While the entire questionnaire was a self-report format, the height and weight section seemed to be somewhat problematic for the respondents. It appeared that some girls guessed on these two items, and others reported measurements that might have been taken several months earlier. A number of girls left these two questions blank.

Attention was given to gathering a group of girls who were geographically, economically and racially diverse. Fifty-four percent of the participants were Caucasian, 30% were African American, 12% were Asian, 2% were Chicana/Latina and 2% were Native American.

Results and Discussion

Self-Esteem and Physical Activity

The older girls in Phase Two of this study were not as physically active as the younger girls in the first phase. The number of older girls who said they were physically active was 82.1%. This is a drop of 17.9%, compared with the younger group, in which 100% said they were physically active. Since the samples in both studies were selected in a similar way, this difference between older and younger girls is not likely due to sample selection.

Although the older girls were not as physically active as the younger girls, the rate of participation was still comparatively high in relation to national figures documenting physical activity and sports participation in this population (13). This high level of physical activity might be attributed to both the recruitment and selection of focus group members, most of whom were participants in organizations that incorporated physical activity into their programs. Also, the acknowledged focus of Melpomene's work might have influenced the girls' responses.

As shown in Table 2, the frequency of physical activity for the girls in this group declines when compared to the younger girls. Only 35.8% of the girls in this study were active four or more times per week, in contrast to 60.5% of the younger girls. These findings are consistent with previous research documenting the decline in activity levels of teenaged girls (4, 13).

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Table 3 illustrates the wide variety of physical activities that the participants said they engaged in. Although the girls in both groups participated in a wide variety of activities, the percentage of girls participating in each activity was lower for the older girls.

Self-esteem was measured in this study in two ways. The first measure, the Melpomene Confidence/Competence Scale, represented a broad measure of self-esteem as well as of feelings of confidence and competence in one's ability in areas such as sports, math, science and school in general. The second measurement was the AAUW Self-Esteem Index, which was used to measure feelings of self-confidence alone.

The mean score of the Confidence/Competence Scale was 82.21, with a range of 59 to 99. A low score on this scale indicated lower levels of confidence and perceived competence and a high score indicated higher levels.

The mean AAUW Self-Esteem Index Score for the older girls in this study was 3.03, as shown in Figure 1. This is a decline from 3.32 for the younger girls in the first study. The score of 3.03 for the older girls is slightly higher than the scores documented for girls this age by the AAUW, presented in its report "Shortchanging Girls, Shortchanging America" (10). The AAUW study indicates that girls' self-esteem levels drop throughout the adolescent years, with high school girls having a Self-Esteem Index Score of 2.77. It is important to note that the score of 3.03 found in our study continues to follow the trend of declining self-esteem as girls move through their teens.

As shown in Table 4, the Confidence/Competence Scale and the Self-Esteem Index both indicate a trend toward relatively high levels of self-esteem, confidence and competence during the adolescent years, with a drop in the mid-teens and a strong increase in the late teen years. While not consistent with the AAUW's results, this is an encouraging trend, in that there is some indication that girls may recover some esteem and confidence during the latter teen years.

African-American girls scored higher on both the Confidence/Competence Scale and the Self-Esteem Index. This finding is consistent with the findings of the AAUW study that documented a smaller decline in self-esteem for African-American girls than for girls of any other racial identity.

Results of a chi square test of association indicated a statistically significant relationship ($p<.01$) between the number of physical activities each girl engaged in, the number of times per week she engaged in the activity and overall Confidence/Competence. This means that those girls who were most active in terms of times per week or those girls who participated in a greater number of sports were more likely to have higher Confidence/Competence Scores than those girls who were not as physically active.

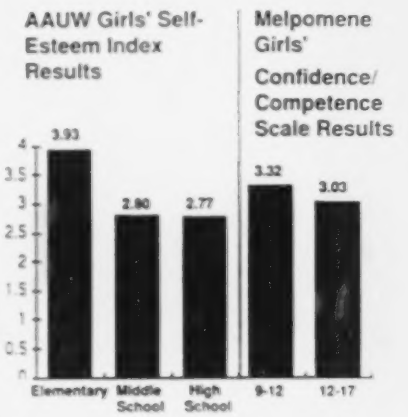

Figure 1

Further, girls with low Confidence/Competence Scores of 59 to 79 indicated an average number of physical activities of 1.45, compared with 2.20 for girls with mid Confidence/Competence Scores of 79 to 87 and 3.27 for girls with high scores between 88 to 99. "Level," the average of times per week, hours per week and number of activities, also reflected a similar trend. Girls in the low Confidence/Competence Score group had a mean Level of 1.86, the mid score group had a mean Level of 2.44, and the high group had a mean Level of 3.42. Also, those girls who participated in activities the highest number of times per week also scored highest on the Confidence/Competence Score and the Self-Esteem Index.

The Self-Esteem Index, a measure of confidence and self-esteem, did not support the positive relationship between physical activity and self-esteem. The question arose among the researchers as to whether competence levels alone, independent of measures of self-esteem, were related to higher levels of physical activity. To explore this question further, a competence index comprised of five questions from the questionnaire, related to compe-

Frequency and Hours of Physical Activity for Older and Younger Girls

Times per Week	Older Girls		Younger Girls	
	#	%	#	%
0-1	14	20.9	8	10.5
2-3	20	29.9	22	28.9
4-6	15	22.4	27	35.5
7 or more	9	13.4	19	25.0
Missing or not active	9	13.4	-	-
Hours per Week	**#**	**%**	**#**	**%**
Less than 2	12	17.9	12	16.0
At least 2, less than 4	21	31.3	17	22.3
At least 4, less than 7	8	11.9	23	30.7
7 or more	16	23.9	23	30.7
Missing or not active	10	14.9	-	-

Table 2

tence only, was devised. When physical activity levels were analyzed in relation to the competence index, the results did not support any relationship between the two variables. This leads us to conclude that higher levels of physical activity are related to the combination of confidence and competence, rather than competence or confidence alone.

Additionally, transcripts from focus group conversations with the older girls support the relationship between self-esteem and competence and physical activity. Girls in both studies derived positive self-esteem and feelings of competence from physical activity through challenge, achievements in sports, risk-taking experiences and skill development. For example, one girl described how she felt about sports in the following way: "I have a hard time with some sports, but I'm also pretty good in other ones, and those are the ones that I do, so when you play sports and you do pretty well at them, it makes you feel better about yourself, it makes you feel proud of what you did, you know, and that's just a good feeling."

The girls in the older group voiced some additional sources of self-esteem through sports that the younger girls did not. Many of the older girls spoke of feeling good about themselves because sports gave them approval from others. For example, one girl said, "I think it's the biggest rush you can get when you do well; and I like to see my parents proud, and it kind of gets you a name in the school — you're not just another person, you have something that people know you for." The idea of approval was expressed by another girl, who said, "I like doing sports. They keep me in shape, and they're fun. When you have friends and stuff, they can go to watch you and they think you're really good." Another said, "I guess I do it (play sports) for respect."

The older girls also spoke about girls in general being capable and able to play well, despite opinions from others to the contrary. In one focus group exchange, three girls talked about this general feeling of competence in the following way. Girl 1: "Boys, they like to hog the basketball. They always want to keep the girls out because they don't think we can play." Girl 2: "They just don't know girls are better." Girl 3: "Just as good as the boys."

In a different focus group, one girl said, "In gym, we were just in the swimming unit and we were playing water polo, and there were not as many girls on the team as there were boys, but there was still some girls and some are really good at this sport."

Obstacles to Physical Activity

Boys

Like the younger girls, the older girls in this study found that boys often controlled their games and inhibited their play. The older girls voiced this in a variety of ways. For example, one girl said, "Even if you're right there, they won't pass you the ball." Another said, "They just take over the whole thing and they don't give the girls a chance."

Another girl voiced her experience in this way: "When you play soccer or volleyball or whatever and you have the boys on your team, they tend to not pass it as much." Interviewer: "Pass it to?" Girl: "I mean in soccer we have half the girls standing out most of the time because all the boys are playing."

This control was also experienced in the way teams were picked. For example, one girl said, "I don't know, in my seventh grade class, we had to pick teams and they pick all the boys and then, I don't know..." Interviewer: "Then they pick the girls?" Girl: "The girls last. The girls are always last."

Some girls in this study, like the younger girls, said they were inhibited from participation because they were afraid of criticism from boys if they made a mistake. About this, one girl said, "Some things I'm good at, but the boys seem to

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Physical Activities Engaged in by Older and Younger Girls

	Older Girls		Younger Girls	
Activity	#	%	#	%
Not Active	11	16.4	0	0
Basketball	24	35.8	35	46.1
Run	19	28.4	30	39.5
Baseball/Softball	15	22.4	32	42.1
Bike	14	20.9	49	64.5
Volleyball	13	19.4	2	2.6
Swim	13	19.4	54	71.1
Walk	9	13.4	12	15.8
Dance	7	10.4	22	28.9
Soccer/Kickball	7	10.4	30	39.5
Bowl	7	10.4	8	10.5
Racquet sports	4	6.0	18	23.7
Football	4	6.0	0	0
Gymnastics	4	6.0	14	18.4
Ski	3	4.5	10	13.2
Skate	3	4.5	14	18.4
Jump rope	2	3.0	5	6.6
Gym class	1	1.5	0	0
Musical instr.	-	-	9	11.8
Canoeing	-	-	4	5.3
Exercise machine	-	-	3	3.9
Other	7	10.4	20	26.3

Table 3

Confidence/Competence Score and Self-Esteem Index by Age and Racial Identity

Age	#	Conf./ Comp. Score	S.E. Index
12	7	82.86	3.43
13	20	82.10	2.85
14	13	81.38	1.23
15	12	81.50	3.83
16	10	81.70	3.50
17	5	86.60	5.00

Racial Identity	#	Conf./ Comp. Score	S.E. Index
Asian	8	79.63	3.13
African American	20	84.30	4.85
Caucasian	36	81.58	1.92

Note: The size of samples of girls of other racial identities was not large enough to yield representative results.

Table 4

be a little better than me. If I were to miss a flying ball or miss a hoop, they would just start yelling at me like I did that on purpose, that I did not want to make it or that I did not want to catch it. They're always putting me down."

Some of the older girls, however, have risen to the challenge to be "good enough" to play with the boys. One girl explained, "You're made to try harder, because if the boys think they can get a strike out or something, you want to prove them wrong." Some of the girls said they simply no longer listen to criticism from boys. For example, one girl said, "Most of the time, boys don't mess with us because if we know what we're doing they don't have a reason to mess with us, 'cuz what we're doing is right." Another spoke about her experience in the weight room:

Obstacles to Physical Activity for Older and Younger Girls

	Older Girls		Younger Girls	
Obstacle	#	%	#	%
Not enough time	8	11.9	-	-
Conflict w/other activities	7	10.4	23	30.2
Injury/physical & health limitations	6	9.0	15	19.7
Lack motivation/ fatigue	4	6.0	15	19.7
Low confidence in ability	4	6.0	7	9.2
No obstacles	4	6.0	10	13.1
Gender issues	3	4.5	-	-
Size (too short, small)	3	4.5	-	-
Environment/ equip. difficulties	3	4.5	6	7.9
Difficulty with skill	2	3.0	2	2.6
Don't know	2	3.0	-	-
Child care	-	-	6	7.9
No ride	-	-	5	6.6
Chores	-	-	3	3.9
No playmate	-	-	2	2.6
Other	7	10.4	6	7.9
Blank or not active	14	20.9	5	6.6

Table 5

"Yeah, that's a low weight and they (the boys) look at you and they go 'oh wow, she's lifting weights,' but it doesn't matter what they think — I'm doing it for myself."

Lack of Opportunity

When younger girls spoke about inequitable treatment, such as from gym teachers, it tended to be on a personal level. The older girls, however, demonstrated an understanding of *systematic* limitations to their opportunities. These limitations took the form of fewer team choices, limited equipment or not being taken seriously.

The girls spoke about a system that favors boys and men. One said, "They (the boys) get better coaches, more time, you know, fields to play or whatever. . . ." Another girl said, "You go out and have the girls' games and, you know, basically all the girls' parents are there and then you go to the boys' games and the whole stands are filled." Another said, "If the boys are doing well, then they say 'let's get the boys' team to go to state' but if it's the girls' team, they'll be like 'it's fine like it is, because everyone is getting a chance to play and they're having a good time or whatever'."

Many girls spoke about the lack of opportunity to play the sports that they wanted or to play a sport at an appropriate level for them. One said, "I want to play football and there isn't a girls' team." Another said, "I want to play ice hockey and the only way to play ice hockey is to join a boys' league team or get on an in-house team where you have to be really good."

The outcome of not having the opportunities they would like is that many girls felt it was too late to start a new sport. One girl summed this up in the following way, "I think it'd be fun to play. I would have liked to have done that if they had girls' hockey when I was younger. Then I probably would be playing. But they just started it real recently so. . . ."

Other Obstacles

The older girls in this study talked about being incredibly busy. Lack of time and conflicts with other activities were two additional obstacles that the girls voiced on the questionnaires (see Table 5) and in the focus groups. Homework, after school activities and, for some girls, jobs took up much of the time that they might otherwise give to sports.

A lack of confidence in ability, which was cited by only 6% of the girls on the questionnaires, was voiced in different ways in focus group discussions. For example, girls spoke about not wanting to look stupid, not being good at a sport or being worried about making mistakes as obstacles to their playing. One girl expressed her hesitation in the following way: "I started bowling when I was six and I wasn't very good at that, so I think my self-esteem had something to do with the sports. I'm not great at them so I don't even try."

Physical limitations also kept some girls from participating in sports as much as they would like. The limitations included body size, fear of getting hurt, health problems and, for one girl, pregnancy.

Coaches also played a role in whether girls participated in sports or not. While problems with coaches did not appear on the questionnaire, the girls talked about their coaches in the focus groups. For example, one girl said, "She's actually more like our best friend rather than a coach, and I don't think anybody on our team respects her, and it's like you really can't be a good coach if the team doesn't respect you. She'll tell us to do something and we'll do it half-heartedly or we'll say we don't want to do it."

Motivators for Physical Activity

Having fun is the primary motivator for girls in this age group to be physically active, just as it was for the younger girls in Phase One of this study. This is documented in the questionnaires (see Table 6) and was discussed in every focus group. Girls talked about having fun and liking sports in a variety of ways. For example, one girl said, "I love sports, and that's basically what I do." Another said, "Don't laugh, but I like floor hockey — it's fun." Another said, "That's cheerleading, that's fun. I love cheerleading."

A second motivator to be active, consistent with the motivators of the younger girls, was the physical benefits the older girls derived from participation. Many girls talked about being in shape.

For example, one girl said about track, "I really like the team and it's a great sport, too. I do track more to get in shape, and it's good conditioning." Another girl summed up her reasons for being active by saying, "I can build up my skills and also get my body in shape at the same time and still have fun."

The older girls talked about two additional motivators that the younger girls did not bring up: the social aspects of sport and the approval of others. Some girls said that they participated in sports because their friends were in the same sport, and others talked about meeting new people through sports. One girl said, "The only reason I played was because all my friends were on the team." Another girl summed up her reasons for participating by saying, "Well, I think that sports are important because they help you meet a lot of new people, and just to be involved in an extracurricular, it usually helps. If you're working out on your own, it's a lot harder because no one else is there to encourage you and stuff, but if you're with a team and stuff, everyone's kind of doing it."

Reasons for Older and Younger Girls to Be Physically Active

	Older Girls		Younger Girls	
Reason	#	%	#	%
Fun, enjoyment	36	53.7	58	76.3
Health, physical benefits	15	22.4	20	26.3
Something to do/ keep busy	10	14.9	7	9.2
Be w/friends, meet people	8	11.9	5	6.6
Mental & emotional benefits	6	9.0	1	1.3
Influence of others	3	4.5	-	-
I'm good at it	2	3.0	-	-
Appearance (lose weight, tone)	2	3.0	-	-
Parents want me to	-	-	6	7.9
Learn new skill, future	-	-	5	6.6
Challenge, goals	-	-	4	5.3
School	-	-	3	3.9
I want to	-	-	3	3.9
Other	5	7.5	1	1.3
Blank or not active	10	14.9	2	2.6

Table 6

Encouragement

One of the primary factors in keeping both girls and boys active in sports is encouragement. The questionnaire queried the girls about who encouraged them to be physically active. As shown in Table 7, the most common response to this question was "myself" (73.1%), indicating that the majority of the girls in this study, as with the younger girls, were self-motivated.

An interesting difference between the older and younger girls is that peers (61.2%) were the second most often mentioned source of encouragement for the older girls, but parents were the second most often mentioned source for the younger girls (mother 76.3%, father 57.9%). This change reflects a shift toward peers as the primary influence during adolescence. Parents were cited by the older girls after friends as a source of encouragement, with mother cited by 53.7% and father cited by 41.8%.

Competition

An area where the older girls and the younger girls differed was competition. The need for competition among most of the younger girls was not strong. In fact, some girls felt that the competitive nature of fitness testing in gym class was a deterrent to their being physically active. The older girls, however, seemed divided on their feelings about competition. For some, competition was a motivator for participation. One girl said, "I like being around groups and all having goals for yourself, and getting to know people, and competing is fun." Another girl felt girls' sports needed the opportunity to be more competitive. She said, "I think that they should try to encourage more competitiveness in girls' sports. I don't know if it's quite level yet." Interviewer: "Girls generally don't think it's competitive enough?" Girl: "Right, I don't think it's competitive enough."

There were girls, however, who did not welcome competition. One girl summed up her feelings about coaching and competition in this way: "Well, lots of time, the coaches, you know, they just think that their sport is the best and you should play ball in one sport, which is, sometimes it's too competitive."

Cultural Differences

Some differences attributable to cultural heritage were found among the girls. For example, in a focus group of Hmong girls ranging in age from 13 to 17, the girls discussed the attitudes of their elders toward their physical activity:

Girl: "You know, when you're growing up, it's like, you know, the older people, they look toward you as an adult and you're not supposed to do childish things."

Girl: "But that's only in our culture."

Girl: "At this age, they don't like us to play sports, it's like kids' stuff."

Older and Younger Girls' Responses to the Question "Who Encourages You to Be Physically Active?"

	Older Girls		Younger Girls	
Who	#	%	#	%
Myself	49	75.1	64	84.2
Friends	41	61.2	44	57.9
Mother	36	53.7	58	76.3
Father	28	41.8	44	57.9
Coach	24	35.8	29	38.1
Sibling	17	25.4	30	39.5
Teacher	17	25.4	27	35.5
Organization*	10	14.9	22	28.9
Doctor	4	6.0	7	9.2
No one	2	3.0	6	7.9
Other**	9	13.4	16	21.1
Missing or not active	3	4.5	-	-

* YWCA, youth group, etc.

**uncle, cousin, etc.

Table 7

Girl: "They say, 'Girls are not supposed to play this and that'."

Girl: "They think of us now as adults."

The girls in this group also spoke about gender differences and other expectations in their culture. They talked about the expectation that girls would stay at home "to cook, clean and take care of brothers and sisters." They also spoke about family expectations for marriage at an early age. Further, if the girls went out of the home after school, older family members tended to presume that the girls were going out to get into some kind of trouble. The girls felt it was unfair that expectations were not the same for Hmong boys. About this, one girl simply said, "The boys can do anything they want."

Another difference among the groups that may be related to cultural differences was the frequency that the qualifier "I don't know" prefaced or concluded the girls' responses. For example, a girl said, "I don't know, I just love sports."

Carol Gilligan, a noted researcher on girls' development, writes about girls "who often seem divided from their own knowledge, regularly prefacing their observations by saying, 'I don't know'" (5). Gilligan's research describes girls who enter adolescence full of confidence and sure of what they know. However, three years later, the girls Gilligan describes are unsure of themselves, and their knowledge becomes private. The use of qualifiers, especially "I don't know," is one way that the girls in our study may have protected themselves from their opinions and the criticism of others.

While analyzing the transcripts from the focus groups, we found that among some groups, this qualifier was used frequently. In one group, "I don't know" was used to preface girls' opinions almost 50 times. However, the frequency of "I don't know" among the groups consisting of African-American girls was considerably lower than in any of the other groups, appearing from zero to five times. This may be explained by differences in language patterns among the girls. However, it may also be due to a lack of need to qualify their opinions. This finding is consistent with the higher levels of self-esteem, confidence and competence among the African-American girls, in contrast to lower levels for other girls in the study.

Conclusions

Based on data gathered from both the questionnaire and focus group discussions, the following conclusions can be drawn.

- The girls in this study were physically active in a variety of sports; however, the rate of participation was lower than for the younger girls previously studied.
- The primary reason girls engaged in physical activity was to have fun, followed by positive health benefits.
- Those girls who felt most confident about themselves and their abilities were more likely to participate in physical activities at higher levels than girls who felt less confident. This is consistent with findings from the study of younger girls.
- As with the younger girls, the older girls in this study derived positive self-esteem from sports through challenge, achievement in sports, risk-taking experiences and skill development. Additionally, the older girls also derived positive self-esteem in sports through the approval of others and a belief that girls in general are capable and able to play sports well.
- Differences in attitudes toward physical activity for girls were found in various cultural groups.
- The girls in this study, like the younger girls, felt that behavior by boys was a deterrent to their being as active as they would like. However, some of the older girls reconciled this treatment by rising to challenges set forth by the boys or by simply ignoring the boys' comments.
- The younger girls spoke about the limitation of their opportunities on an individual level. In contrast, some of the older girls understood their opportunities were limited because of systems that favor boys and men.

Recommendations

The decline in athletic participation among adolescent girls and the link between physical activity and positive mental health lead us to believe that girls should be encouraged to remain physically active throughout adolescence and into adulthood. It is important that those adults who work with girls in this age group are aware of the obstacles girls face to participation in sports, as well as girls' motivation for being physically active. It is important for girls to develop the skills necessary to participate in sports with confidence in themselves and their abilities. Some strategies for parents, teachers, coaches and recreation specialists might include:

- Provide opportunties for girls in all kinds of sports, including traditional male sports, such as football and hockey. Opportunities should be provided for girls of all skill levels. Equipment must be provided by the sponsoring agency to ensure that girls' participation will not be limited by finances.
- Be aware of a girl's motivation for participating in a sport. Girls in this age group participate not only for fun but also to socialize, compete and get in shape.
- Sports opportunities should be provided at a variety of commitment levels.
- Keep sports participation fun. Girls are more likely to continue participating when the focus is on fun, self-esteem, skill building and teamwork.
- Support girls' athletics by being a fan. Encouragement and approval are strong motivators for girls' sports participation.
- Emphasize women role models who are active in sports, such as coaches and collegiate, Olympic and professional athletes.
- Encourage girls to speak out for increased opportunities for women and girls to participate in sports. ●

For Bibliography, please see page 28

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